THE TIGER AND THE CRAB (Assamese)

Long time ago, in a certain forest, there lived a tiger. As he was changing his den, he met a crab on the way. Accosting the tiger, the crab smiled and said, “Brother, where are you going?” The tiger was pleased at this and replied, “I am going to another forest as I am changing my den. Where are you going?” The crab said, “I am not going anywhere. My house is just near. I am a lonely creature; I have no near and dear ones.” The tiger said, “Same is the case with me. I am also lonely and hapless. I too have no one.” This way they conversed and after that, they became so pleased with each other that they began to stay near each other in the forest.

They continued to live in harmony for some days. The tiger used to hunt down deer and the two shared and ate with great delight. Seeing that the tiger was a friend of the crab, other animals did not dare to do it any harm. One day, the crab said to the tiger, “Friend, I am tired of eating flesh. To tell you the truth, the consumption of flesh daily is slowly making me dyspeptic. As such, how would it be if we eat vegetarian meals at times? Let us cultivate.” The tiger said, “What is there so difficult in agriculture? If you think it is good, let’s cultivate.” So saying, the tiger agreed to the crab’s plan. As such, the crab said, “In that case, Friend, you go to the village and bring some rice-seedlings from the paddy-field. I will till this part of land in the forest.” Thus they discussed the matter. The crab began to dig the soil and the tiger stole seedlings of fine fragrant paddy from a nearby field and planted those in their plot of land.

Soon young stalks with grains began to emerge from the plants. Looking at the farm, the pleased crab said to the tiger, “We have grown paddy but, what would it be like if we do not have enough vegetables? How shall we eat mere rice? As such, we will have to grow vegetables too. You go and bring some seedlings of different kinds of vegetables from the village. Don’t forget to bring a few seedlings of brinjal too. I am tilling the soil for the vegetable garden.” So saying, the crab gave the tiger a basket to bring the required seedlings of vegetables and started to dig the soil with a hoe. The tiger had just taken a few steps when the crab called out loudly, “Friend, I forgot to tell you. Bring a few chilly-seedlings too. It won’t be relishing if there are no chillies to accompany rice along with the delicious curry.” The tiger agreed and ventured towards the village with long strides.

After cultivating the land, the two were in leisure. Slowly, winter set in. The paddy was ripening. The crab made arrangements for reaping the harvest. He said to the tiger, “Friend, I am taking the top.” And the crab gathered the top of the plants, i.e., the grains. The tiger collected the stubbles. After that, it was time to pluck brinjals. The tiger asked the crab, “Friend, what will you take, the seed or the plant?” The crab said that it would take the brinjal and did away with its share. The tiger took the rest of the plant. Thus, after harvesting their crops, the tiger invited the crab for a feast. The tiger cooked the stubbles and the plant portion of the brinjal for the occasion. He served it out to the crab. But how could the crab have such a meal? He touched a little before taking leave. However, even after that, the crab always used to relish sumptuous dishes at the tiger’s place. But it never invited the tiger to have a meal at its place. The tiger was struck by this realization and one day said to the crab, “Friend, you have never invited me to your house for a feast. You arrange a feast some day and invite me. I want to taste the cooking at your place.” The crab replied, “Friend, why shouldn’t I invite you for a feast in my house? I have always been planning to hold a feast and invite you. But my house is a narrow place. It worries me as to where to make you
sit and where to entertain you? I am in a dilemma because of these problems. Be it whatsoever, if you have no objection, please come to my humble dwelling for the morning meal. What do you say, friend? It is a feast only in name, though.” The tiger replied, “Sure, I am coming to attend the feast at your place tomorrow.”

The following morning the crab arranged the feast. He cooked the finest rice and a brinjal-curry. The tiger arrived at the crab’s house to attend the feast. The crab said to the tiger, “Friend, you better sit near my burrow. I will be giving out rice and curry. You keep on eating. After all, you cannot enter into my burrow.” And so, the crab began to bring rice and curry to the mouth of its burrow and the tiger ate with relish. The crab’s earthen cooking-pot was small. Whatever rice was cooked was finished by the tiger in two mouthfuls. So, the crab anticipated grave danger. He thought, “No one can read a tiger’s intention. If he has not eaten well enough to satisfy himself, all his friendship towards me would vanish. Instead, he would feast on me in anger. As such, I have to think out a plan to escape from him.” Thinking so, he said to the tiger, “Friend, carrying rice for you again and again has caused pain in my waist and I am unable to get up. You rather push your tail into my burrow and I will tie bowls of rice and curry onto it. You pull up and keep on eating.” The tiger was unaware of the real purpose behind the crab’s words and did as he was told. As soon as the tiger pushed his tail deep into the hole, the crab squeezed it with its pincers. The tiger suffered terrible pain and tried to pull out its tail but it would not come out. Instead, the squeezing of the crab became more severe. The tiger lost his patience. He screamed so much that it seemed as if the skies would split. Still, the crab did not leave. As luck would have it, a farmer was digging the soil with a hoe in the field at that time. Hearing the tiger’s screams, the farmer left digging and was about to run away with the hoe when the tiger saw him. He wailed and pleaded with the farmer as he said, “Hey Uncle! Come this way, I am dying. The pain of the crab’s squeezing will take my life. Please free my tail.” The farmer replied, “I can’t. Do you understand? You are a tiger. You are not reliable. You will eat me up as soon as I make you free.” The tiger said, “For God’s sake, please come. I swear and promise truly; I won’t eat you. Free me, my Lord. If you save me from this distress, I promise to kill a deer for you everyday.” Hearing this, the farmer trusted the tiger and went near it. He cut the tiger’s tail by striking it with the hoe and the tiger was freed. As the tiger was about to leave that place, he whispered in the farmer’s ear, “According to my promise, I will deliver you a deer everyday. But you shall not divulge it to anybody. If you say, wherever you are, I will take you off immediately.”

The farmer got a deer each day as he did the tiger a favour. Many days passed in this way. One day, the farmer fell sick. His mother called an old lady-augur to predict the future. After some incantation, the lady said that the farmer would be alright if they arrange a feast with venison for their neighbours. When his mother told her son about this, he asked the tiger to bring two deer. On the day of the feast, the tiger killed two deer for the farmer.

On the day of the feast, all the guests were seated to eat. About that time, there was shortage of a plantain-leaf. One of them went to the backyard to bring a leaf from the banana-plant and saw that there was a large heap of bones. The man was surprised at the sight and returned without a leaf. He said to them, “We cannot have a feast in the farmer’s house. He eats something. All of you may come and see to judge for yourselves wherefrom did he get so many bones to pile up?” At this, all rose up from their seats to see and found that it was true. Then, they asked the farmer, “Tell, whose bones are these? Or else, we shall not eat in your house.” The farmer said,
"These are the bones of an animal that I ate and nothing else. Don’t feel bad about it. But I cannot tell you the details of the matter. If I do so, the tiger will take me away. As such, you dispel all doubts. Pardon me and enjoy the feast.” The assembled people did not believe his words and said, “We are surrounding you with sharp weapons. You say or else we leave.” The farmer felt helpless at their resolve. He knelt down as he began to relate the matter and all surrounded him with sharp weapons for protection. As soon as the farmer finished his story, all of a sudden the tiger appeared on the scene from somewhere, seized him and took him away. The assembled guests stood amazed in fear for some time. Then, failing to find him anywhere, they left the place completely baffled.

The farmer on the other hand, was taken to a deep forest. Fortunately for him, at that time, his stomach began to make sounds out of hunger. On hearing the gurgling sound, the tiger asked him, “Who is gurgling in your stomach?” The farmer quickly thought out a plan. He replied, “When I was a child, my mother fed me 120 crabs. Of those, sixty came out earlier and the other sixty remained inside. Now, they want to come out.” At the mention of the word ‘crab’, the tiger thought, “I am finished! It took one crab to make me suffer a hellish torture. Now, if sixty crabs are about to come out, our whole folk would be annihilated.” Thinking this, the tiger left the farmer and escaped.

Being left by the tiger, the farmer slowly went to the bank of a river and stopped under a tree. He saw that the place beneath the tree was a retreat of wild buffaloes. The buffaloes weren’t there at that time. So, he licked the scum of the milk found on the ground in a hurry. Then, he swept, scrubbed and cleaned the place. After that, he climbed the tree and stayed on it.

All the buffaloes returned in the evening after grazing. They were surprised to see their place so tidy. They looked in all directions but could not see anyone. They conversed among themselves and slept.

The next morning, when all the buffaloes went out to graze, the farmer came down the tree. He licked the scum of the milk which fell on the ground from the mouth of the calves when they were sucking their mothers. As on the previous day, he swept the place well, threw out the dung, cleaned properly and then climbed onto the tree. That evening too, the buffaloes were surprised to see their shelter neat and clean. They wanted to know the being connected with this work. They discussed the matter and decided to appoint an old buffalo as the observer. The next morning they acted according to their plan and went out to graze. At the time of going, they said to the old buffalo, “You keep proper watch and see who comes to clean our place. We will bring grass and water for you.” But the mid-day sunshine made the old buffalo fall asleep. When the buffalo slept, the farmer got down from the tree stealthily. As before, he liked the scum, cleaned the place and went up the tree. The old buffalo could not have the slightest idea.

The buffaloes returned in the evening and asked the old-fellow if he saw anyone. He said, “I did not see anything.” They realized that the old buffalo was good for nothing. The next day, they appointed a partially blind she-buffalo as the observer. She also slept with her blind eye uppermost. That day too, the farmer did as he did on other days and climbed the tree. The blind she-buffalo did not see anything. In the evening, when the herd of buffaloes came and asked her about any news, she replied, “I did not see anything.” They understood that she must have slept by keeping her blind eye upwards. So they decided to appoint the head-buffalo as the observer. Next day, they acted accordingly. But that day too, the head-buffalo felt drowsy. The farmer climbed down the tree as before and ate the scum. After cleaning the place, he was just climbing the tree in a hurry when the head-buffalo woke up. On
seeing him, she ran towards him and asked, “Are you a god or a man? Tell. But whatever you are, come down.” The farmer said, “I am no god. I am a man. I will not climb down. If I do, you will gore me to death.” The she-buffalo said, “I won’t harm you, come down.” The farmer said, “No, you will kill me.” The buffalo solemnly promised that she won’t hurt him. At this, the farmer climbed down the tree. He told her everything in detail. On hearing him, she felt pity for him. She told him, “Henceforth, you will stay here without fear. We designate you as our lord and we will provide you with adequate food and shelter.”

When the other buffaloes returned in the evening, the head-buffalo narrated the whole episode to them. They were also delighted and accepted him as their lord. After this, they killed the blind she-buffalo and gave her horns to the farmer. As they did so, they said to him, “Of these two horns, one is the horn of sorrow and the other is the horn of joy. When we are out grazing and you play the horn of joy, we will know that you are fine and so, we shall graze happily. And if you are in any danger and play the horn of sorrow, we will hurry back to you for your protection. You maintain the cleanliness of our shelter as you used to do earlier.”

Time passed on in this way. But one day, as the farmer was sitting on a branch of the tree and was combing his hair, suddenly a long hair fell into the river. This hair was eaten up by a large fish. One day, a fisherman caught the fish. As the fish was large and full of fats, he went and presented it to the king as a tribute.

The king had a beautiful daughter. While the attendants were dressing and slicing out the fish, they discovered the hair inside it. The daughter was also standing near them all the time. Seeing such a long and beautiful hair from the stomach of the fish, the daughter secretly acknowledged the oneness her husband. She took the hair and placed it in a small casket and confined herself in a solitary chamber. When the king asked his daughter the reason behind her action, she said that she would come out of the chamber only if she is married to the owner of the hair or else she would die of hunger and thirst. On hearing his daughter, the king was wonder-struck. How could he search out the person whose hair was found in the fish? The princess was also adamant. Perplexed, the king was thinking about all these. In his predicament, the king was racking his brains to find out a solution.

The princess had a pet-raven. Realizing the trouble of the king, it approached him and said, “Your Majesty, don’t worry. I will find out the owner of the hair. You just give me a ripe mango.” Relying on the raven’s assurance, the king was somewhat relieved. He hurriedly handed over a ripe mango to the raven. It took the mango and went to the forest where the farmer stayed. Approaching him, it cried aloud—

“Who plays the horns of joy and sorrow? Who would like to eat the ripe mango?”

At the mention of ripe mango, the farmer’s mouth watered. He replied—
“I play the horns of joy and sorrow. I shall like to have the ripe mango.”

When the farmer said this, the raven gave the ripe mango to him. As the landlord extended his hand to take the fruit, the raven snatched away the horn of sorrow instantly and fled. People say that, “The crow is the cleverest among the birds.”

On the other hand, the raven handed over the horn of sorrow to the king and said, “The owner of this horn is the owner of the hair. You send a few messengers along with me. I will show him.” As reported by the raven, the king sent a few messengers along with him. Now, it was easy to bring the farmer as he lost his power with the loss of the horn of sorrow. The
messengers caught hold of the farmer and brought him to the king. When the messengers were escorting him, the farmer tore his garments into shreds and dropped the pieces on the way. In the evening, when the buffaloes returned and didn’t find the farmer, they thought that he must be in danger. They followed the track which was strewn with strips of torn garments of the farmer and reached the king’s palace. The king was scared when he saw the herd of wild buffaloes. But the farmer pacified him by saying that they belonged to him. At sight of the farmer, the herd of buffaloes began to dance. The king said to the farmer, “If they belong to you, can you ride on them?”

The farmer replied in the affirmative and showed the feat. The king was pleased at the proof. He gave his daughter to the farmer in marriage and crowned his son-in-law the king and he himself remained as the royal guardian.